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AUTHOR Rusch, Frank R.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study describes varying types of nonhandicapped co-worker interactions with supported employees. The sample included 341 supported employees with mental retardation served by community rehabilitation facilities in Illinois. Results indicated that co-workers interact extensively with persons who are mentally retarded. These interactions include associating, evaluating, advocating, training, collecting data, and befriending. Surprising findings included high levels of advocacy between co-workers and persons with severe/profound mental retardation, and a relatively high percentage of co-workers assuming evaluation and training roles. Results are discussed in relation to the work behavior literature which suggest that co-worker interactions may reflect support that is natural to the workplace. Includes 24 references. (Author/JDD)

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A Descriptive Analysis of Interactions Between Co-workers and Supported Employees

Frank R. Rusch,

Carolyn Hughes,

John R. Johnson,

and

Kathleen E. Minch

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Abstract

This study describes varying types of nonhandicapped co-worker interactions with supported employees. Results indicated that co-workers interact extensively with persons who are mentally retarded. Surprising findings included high levels of advocacy between co-workers and persons with severe/profound mental retardation, and a relatively high percentage of co-workers assuming evaluation and training roles. Results are discussed in relation to the work behavior literature which indicates that in general co-workers provide considerable natural support for employees across work environments.

A Descriptive Analysis of Interactions Between Co-Workers and Supported Employees

Supported employment focuses upon wages, support, and integration among persons with severe disabilities. Federal policy suggests that integration is the key element to supported employment. Several researchers have argued that co-worker interactions as a result of integrated employment may provide the support needed for these employees to obtain a measure of independence across varying demands and expectations often characteristic of competitive employment (Chadsey-Rusch & Gonzalez, 1988; Chadsey-Rusch, Gonzalez, Tines, & Johnson, 1989; Hughes, Rusch, & Curl, in press; Likins, Salzberg, Stowitscheck, Lignugaris/Kraft, & Curl, 1989; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rusch, Johnson, & Hughes, in press; Rusch & Minch, 1988; Shafer, 1986). Because of their consistent presence in the work environment, Rusch (1986) identified co-workers as potential collaborators in our efforts to support employee work performance. For example, Crouch, Rusch, and Karlan (1984) taught co-workers to prompt employees with moderate mental retardation to use their wrist watches to facilitate initiation and completion of job tasks at appropriate times. The supported employees demonstrated that they could start and complete their jobs on time with the support of their co-workers.

Recently, research has begun to investigate co-worker relationships in an effort to better understand employees' roles in promoting long-term employment and adjustment on the job (Lagomarcino & Rusch, 1988; Rusch & Minch, 1988; Shafer, 1986; Wehman & Kregel, 1985). Co-workers refer to employees who: (a) work in the proximity of a supported employee (within 600 sq ft), (b) perform the same or similar duties as the supported employee, or (c) take breaks or eat meals in the same area as the supported employee (Rusch, Chadsey-Rusch, & Johnson, in press). At least six types of co-worker relationships have been reported in the applied research literature (Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rusch & Minch, 1988; Shafer, 1986; White, 1986). This support includes: (a) co-workers advocating for supported employees (advocating); (b) co-workers interacting socially with supported employees at the workplace (associating); (c) co-workers interacting socially with supported employees outside of the workplace (befriending); (d) co-workers collecting data on supported employees' performance (collecting data); (e) co-workers evaluating supported employees' performance (evaluating); and (f) co-workers training supported employees (training).

Researchers have suggested that employment training personnel consider routinely enlisting the support of co-workers in efforts to strengthen the possibility of promoting work adjustment (Hughes et al. in press;

Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rusch & Minch, 1988). For example, Wehman, Hill, and Koehler (1979) transferred verbal prompting provided by an employment specialist to that provided by the work supervisor of a kitchen employee with moderate mental retardation. The employment specialist gradually withdrew from the vicinity of the supported employee. Also, Rusch and Menchetti (1981) taught co-workers to deliver a warning to a food service employee with moderate mental retardation for non-compliance to requests by supervisors, co-workers, and cooks. Co-workers were taught to report the results of the intervention to follow-up staff. Wilson, Schepis, and Mason-Main (1987) withdrew the employment specialist from the kitchen (the actual work area) to the dining area of a restaurant, after which only periodic site visits were made to evaluate the work behavior of an employee with moderate mental retardation. Additionally, prompts and feedback were provided by the restaurant owners and the employee's co-workers.

The purpose of this study was to extend the work behavior literature by investigating co-worker roles that may be emerging between supported employees and employees who are not disabled. Specifically, this study sought to determine if the types of co-worker involvement identified in the literature (i.e., advocating, associating, befriending, collecting data, evaluating, training) are being assumed by employees without disabilities. If the results of this investigation support

emerging literature related to co-workers as trainers, evaluators, and in other roles, it may be that future research could begin to define more fully types of relationships that should form between co-workers and supported employees to enhance overall work adjustment and performance maintenance.

Methods

Sample Derivation

The sample for this study included 341 supported employees served by community rehabilitation facilities implementing supported employment programs throughout the state of Illinois. Persons were selected for inclusion in the sample on the basis of the following criteria:

1. Persons who experience mental retardation as a primary disability, as reported by agencies on the basis of the most current psychological evaluation and/or other enrollment information collected by each agency. Classification of disability included one of four levels of mental retardation (i.e., mild, moderate, severe, profound) based on the American Association on Mental Retardation's classification (Grossman, 1983);
2. Data were available on co-worker involvement during the month of June 1989 (See section on data collection for description of co-worker data);

3. All persons were served by a supported employment program funded by the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Illinois Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, and/or the Illinois Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Subject Overview

During June 1989, employment programs served a total of 478 persons. Of that number, 137 persons were reported as having primary disabilities other than mental retardation. The final sample used for this study, therefore, was 341 persons. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample selected for consideration.

Insert Table 1 about here

Mean length of employment for supported employees during the period beginning July 1, 1988 and ending June 30, 1989 was 8.3 months (S.D. = 3.9). Overall gross monthly income for employees averaged $359 (S.D. = $255). Averages for employees with mild, moderate, and severe/profound mental retardation were $401 (S.D. = $259), $306 (S.D. = $247), and $221 (S.D. = $135), respectively. On the average, supported employees worked 101 hours per month (S.D. = 46). Time spent working

averaged 108 (S.D. = 46), 90 (S.D. = 43), and 86 (S.D. = 46) hours per month for employees with mild, moderate, and severe/profound mental retardation, respectively. As indicated in Table 1, employees previously worked in a variety of employment options, with the greatest numbers having been employed in regular work (i.e., sheltered workshop employment, n = 104), developmental training II programs (i.e., work activities training, n = 83), and work adjustment training programs (n = 45).

Data Collection

During the month of June 1988, all participating rehabilitation agencies received a Co-worker Involvement Reporting Form from the University of Illinois, as well as instructions for completing the form and a stamped return envelope (form available upon request from first author). Ten days after the suggested return date, the participating agency received a telephone call if its form had not been received or was incompletely filled out. Returned forms were entered into a dBase III plus file by trained computer programmers.

Instructions accompanying the Co-worker Involvement Reporting Forms requested that the employment specialist who was primarily responsible for providing post-placement, long-term follow-up complete the form. All employment specialists participating in the Illinois Supported Employment

Project attended a total of three, two-day workshops beginning in the spring and summer of 1987, in which they were trained to collect data concerning co-worker involvement using direct observation (and verbal report, when assessing the occurrence of befriending). Additionally, all employment specialists were provided at least two on-site visits beginning in the fall of 1985, which included technical assistance in data collection by technical assistance and program evaluation staff members of the University of Illinois. During the workshops and the scheduled site visits, employment specialists were given information and provided opportunities to ask questions about the data collection requirements of the three funding agencies.

The Co-worker Involvement Reporting Form consisted of two sections. The first section assessed employment specialist hours involved in supported employment activities provided to the supported employee. The second section consisted of six items concerning co-worker involvement. These items required the employment specialist to evaluate the occurrence or nonoccurrence of six types of co-worker involvement provided to the supported employee (i.e., advocating, associating, befriending, collecting data, evaluating, training). Table 2 provides definitions used by agencies for reporting type of co-worker involvement.

Co-workers received no training or prompting to provide support to target employees. The types of co-worker

involvement were not mutually exclusive; co-workers could provide more than one type of assistance to any number of target employees. Agency personnel simply reported the occurrence or nonoccurrence of each type of co-worker involvement received by each target employee present at a work site.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results and Discussion

The present study found that co-workers are involved extensively with supported employees. Of the 341 supported employees included in this study, 87% associated with co-workers (n = 295), 66% were evaluated by co-workers (n = 226), 56% had co-worker advocates (n = 191), 55% were trained by co-workers (n = 186), 27% had co-workers who collected data on their work performance (n = 91), and 23% were friends of co-workers (n = 79). Table 3 presents the percentage of supported employees who experienced co-worker involvement in relation to their disability category (i.e., mild, moderate, severe/profound). Of the supported employees with severe/profound mental retardation, 43% were found to have experienced some type of co-worker involvement, as compared to

56% of the individuals with mild mental retardation and 47% of the employees with moderate mental retardation. Except for the area of advocacy, individuals with severe/profound mental retardation were found to experience less co-worker involvement across all types of co-worker support than did their peers with moderate and mild mental retardation.

Insert Table 3 about here

Perhaps the most striking finding was the large percentage of co-workers (56%) who advocated for supported employees at the workplace. Other researchers have noted the relationship between advocacy in the workplace and job retention of employees with mental retardation (Chadsey-Rusch & Rusch, 1988; Wacker, Fromm-Steege, Berg, & Flynn, in press; Wehman, 1981). Future research may determine that early advocacy patterns ultimately lead to increases in overall co-worker involvement.

This study extends the literature on co-worker involvement in supported employment in several ways. First, it describes roles that co-workers assume with supported employees. Shafer (1986) suggested that co-workers may train, observe, advocate for, and evaluate their co-workers with disabilities. The present investigation confirmed that co-workers do assume these

roles. All supported employees were found to have received at least one form of support from their nonhandicapped co-workers. The percentage of supported employees receiving support varied, however. The greatest percentage of supported employees had co-workers who assumed roles as associates; the least reported role was as a friend.

Social acceptance of employees with disabilities has been proposed as a major factor in the successful participation of these employees in competitive employment (Hughes et al., in press). In this study, supported employees associated extensively with their co-workers at work (87%). This finding may have been a result of employment specialists promoting the social acceptance of supported employees by encouraging interactions by co-workers. Employment specialist involvement was not assessed in this study and remains an important area of future study. Employment specialists may provide the necessary stimulus for social acceptance in the workplace.

Fifty-five percent of the supported employees were trained by their co-workers. This finding is supported by literature that identifies widespread acceptance among employers for co-worker training of supported employees (Rusch, Minch, & Hughes, in press). Menchetti, Rusch, and Lamson (1981) surveyed food service employers to assess acceptable instructional strategies for use among employees with handicaps. They found that of the employers surveyed, 64%

would always allow a co-worker to repeat an instruction to a target employee, 71% would always allow co-workers to show a target employee what to do, and 57% would always allow the co-worker to physically assist the target employee. A large percentage of supported employees were evaluated by co-workers. Shafer (1986) suggested that evaluating requires little in the way of skill development or time commitment.

Few supported employees (27%, n = 91) had co-workers who collected data on them. Menchetti et al. (1981) found that 43% of the employers responded that data could not be collected on employees with handicaps in the work setting. One explanation for this finding may be that employers do not allow data to be collected on their employees unless it relates directly to scheduled evaluations.

Few interactions were reported outside the workplace (23%). Limited befriending may be an artifact of the data collection method used (i.e., lack of opportunity to observe interactions). Conversely, it may be that people typically interact infrequently with their colleagues outside of their common work environments.

In summary, this study found that supported employees are interacting with co-workers in competitive employment settings. These interactions include associating, evaluating, advocating, training, collecting data, and befriending. Results also suggest that co-worker interactions may reflect

support that is natural to the workplace (Rusch, Chadsey-Rusch, & Johnson, in press; Rusch & Minch, 1988; Shafer, 1986). Further research clearly is warranted that investigates the relationship between employee variables such as disability level, production, social skills, independent performance, and adaptive behavior and co-worker interactions.

Author Notes

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Copies of this paper may be obtained from Frank R. Rusch, Transition Institute at Illinois, College of Education, 1310 South Sixth Street, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL 61820.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Supported Employment Workers

(June 1989; N = 341)

Average Age (years)	32	Race/Ethnicity	
		White	268
Average IQ	57	Black	53
		Asian	4
Primary Disabilities		American Indian	14
Mild MR (IQ range 55-75)	212	Not Reported	2
Moderate MR (IQ range 40-54)	104	Total	341
Severe/Profound (IQ range 0-39)	25		
Total	341	Type of Placement Model	
		Individual	159
		Clustered	157
Secondary Disabilities		Mobile Crew	17
Mental Illness	18	Not Reported	8
Sensory Impairments	19	Total	341
Traumatic Brain Injury	2		
Physical Disability	16	Type of Previous Placement	
Health Impaired	19	Regular Work	104
Substance Abuse	7	Developmental Training II	83
Autism	2	Work Adjustment Training	45
Total	83	School	24
		Skills Training	9
Gender		Community	8
Male	192	Developmental Training I	4
Female	149	Evaluation	3
Total	341	Not Reported	61
		Total	341

Table 2

Measures Used to Define Co-worker Interactions with Supported Employees (Rusch, Hughes, McNair, & Wilson, 1989)

Advocating	Co-worker advocates by supporting a range of social and work behaviors.
Associating	Co-worker interacts socially with the supported employee at the workplace.
Befriending	Co-workers intentionally interact socially with the supported employee outside of the workplace.
Collecting Data	Co-worker collects data by observing and recording a range of targeted social and work behaviors.
Evaluating	Co-worker evaluates the supported employee's performance by providing written or verbal feedback according to operationalized standard.
Training	Co-worker provides on-the-job training by demonstrating the performance of a skill, prompting a response, or providing feedback.

Table 3

Frequency of Co-worker Interactions among Persons with Mental Retardation by Category of Disability (N = 341)

Type of Co-worker Involvement	Mild (N = 212)		Moderate (N = 104)		Severe/ Profound (N = 25)			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Associating	186	88	89	86	20	80	295	87
Evaluating	156	74	57	55	13	52	226	66
Training	126	59	50	48	10	40	186	55
Advocating	116	55	60	58	15	60	191	56
Collecting Data	65	31	23	22	3	12	91	27
Befriending	60	28	16	15	3	12	79	23